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Breathing New Life into Warren Studies: A Project in Secondary Education

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Wes Berry, Kristina Rice, and Angela Sloan

I
Introduction
Wes Berry

How do we inspire new generations of Warren scholars? I have pondered this question since 1994, when I first attended the annual symposium devoted to the study of Robert Penn Warren's work. I was a student then, enrolled in a seminar on Warren at Western Kentucky University, and studying Warren's poetry and fiction with the passion of the newly converted. I'd first encountered Warren a couple of years before, having read *All the King's Men* in a general education composition class. I recognized in Warren a kindred voice, somebody who used the language of my people in southcentral Kentucky and wrote about familiar subjects like tobacco and caves. So confident I was of Warren's greatness that I continued to read his novels in graduate school in Mississippi, where I had gone to study Faulkner. I completed an M.A. thesis about "bad sex" in Warren's fiction—why the sexual encounters in his work are often awkward and violent rather than sensual or loving—and considered including Warren as part of my Ph.D. dissertation. It was then that I encountered resistance from my advisor, an American literature scholar whose opinion of Warren was unflattering. I recall her saying, "Gee, Wes, how can you love Gary Snyder so much and Robert Penn Warren at the same time?" My director's words and tone suggested that Warren was a musty writer in contrast to Snyder's progressive politics and playful verse. Warren's associates were those old-fashioned New Critics and possibly racist Agrarians; Snyder's camp included hipster Beats, communal hippies, and Buddhist monks. I envisioned these writers on opposite sides of Robert Frost's stone wall: Snyder sitting zazen, Warren pontificating about Time and History.

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My gut told me that this imagined schism was not so simple, that these writers held more in common than my director believed. I told her that Warren's work was both serious and playful, and that his vision *was* progressive. Just look at *Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce*, I said. Consider his critical treatment of American exceptionalism. While Warren may not be writing poems about sitting naked in sweat lodges, he, like Snyder, values life. Warren even has an environmental vision, I argued, albeit not as explicit as Snyder's.

My director's negative views of Warren's work made me think about literary cachet. I wanted a teaching post after graduation, and I certainly did not want to be deterred from my goal by writing a dissertation on a DWM, especially one whose literary stock appeared questionable to my director. I wondered how Warren's vast body of work would age.

Returning on a few occasions to the annual gathering of Warren scholars, I saw many familiar faces, a few new ones, and I thought, *How can we enlarge this circle of enthusiasts? How can we turn new people on to Warren's work?* I compared the attendance at the Warren symposium with that of the annual Faulkner conference, which I attended regularly from 1994-2000. The Faulkner conference impressed me by drawing a considerable number of international scholars and a quite a few young people, and I compared this scene with what I detected to be the aging (gracefully, of course) of the Warren Circle. I considered reasons for the apparent ongoing health of Faulkner studies and the lesser enthusiasm for Warren studies, thinking, *Is Faulkner just that much better than Warren? Is he favored because his racial politics appear more progressive than Warren's? Do Warren's melodramatic historical novels reduce his literary stock? Are young scholars put off by Warren's abstract metaphysical questioning, especially in the poetry?*

These questions have stayed with me over this past decade. I have transitioned from student to teacher, and I recently taught the same course at my undergraduate alma mater that initially turned me on to Warren's work. In this seminar on Robert Penn Warren, I encountered some of the problems I anticipated from a single-author course, like student burn out. The majority of these university students were lukewarm about Warren's poetry, finding it opaque, puzzling,

loaded with unnecessarily complicated vocabulary. They were more enthusiastic about the fiction. As the semester progressed, I considered the challenges of teaching Warren to my students, and thought, *If I'm encountering resistance to Warren's work in the university classroom, then how can we ever expect to make it accessible to high school students?* I know that Shakespeare remains influential in high school English classes. So does Hawthorne. As one response to this "aging" of Warren studies, why not teach Warren to high school students, especially in his native state of Kentucky? Making Warren part of a high school curriculum could help to strengthen this writer's "holding power"—his durability in American literary studies—but this effort presents challenges.

The following lesson plans outline efforts to teach Warren's fiction in high schools. In the spring of 2007, Angela Sloan taught Warren's *All the King's Men* and *The Cave* to her two A.P. English students using a comparative, intertextual approach. She details her successes here, along with the students' responses to their study of Warren. While Ms. Sloan focused her teaching on Warren's novels, Kristina Rice planned a unit centered on Warren's short stories. Ms. Rice uses several creative approaches to make Warren's stories accessible to students, including comparative studies that draw on popular songs and film.

Warren studies can benefit from the insights of these teachers. Ms. Sloan, for instance, points out the paucity of on-line teaching guides available to assist high school educators in teaching Warren's work. Another issue arising in these pedagogy papers is the complexities of teaching Warren to "regular" high school English students. Ms. Rice claims that she will teach Warren only to advanced students, while Ms. Sloan remains hopeful about teaching Warren's fiction to non-advanced English classes—although her hopes are at this point untested.

My hope is that we will see more pedagogy papers in the journal *RWP* in future volumes, and that the efforts of these teachers will inspire a few young Kentuckians to read more work by our native son, and of course that these young readers will also pass it on.

II

Teaching Robert Penn Warren to High School Students: An Experiment in Intertextuality

Angela Sloan

In Kentucky, as in other states across the nation, secondary teachers are required by law to teach a certain curriculum; in Kentucky, this is known as the Program of Studies. From this program, a set of core content is chosen which will be used to construct state assessments given to students at various grade levels in various areas. Addressing literacy curricula, the Kentucky Department of Education lists a set of representative authors for each literary time period to aid school districts in creating curriculum for their courses. Robert Penn Warren was one of the names of representative authors listed under the Modern Period. Even though his name was listed, few secondary teachers across the state of Kentucky were including the study of Warren's fiction and poetry in their courses. For some reason, the study of native Kentuckian Robert Penn Warren has never achieved the same status in high schools across the state of Kentucky as some of the more "tried and true" American authors like Poe, Hawthorne, Twain, and Fitzgerald.

To illustrate how oblivious educators in Kentucky are to the study of Warren, consider the following: A few years ago, the principal at the high school where I work called a meeting with the English Department to create curriculum maps for each grade level, detailing precisely what would be taught by each teacher at each grade level. Since our principal was a former English teacher with over twenty years of experience in the classroom and each of the five English teachers present felt confident in his/her content knowledge and pedagogy, the task at hand was assumed to be of relative ease. While reviewing the representative author list supplied by the state, we came to the name RP Warren. The principal and four other English teachers present had no clue who this author was and couldn't understand why the Kentucky State Department would list such an obscure author as being representative of any time period. Because I was a graduate of Western Kentucky University, where the Robert Penn Warren Library is located, I knew who RP Warren

was and had partial knowledge of his works. While it may seem surprising that I was the only person in a room with six Kentucky English teachers to know who Robert Penn Warren was, I think such ignorance is common; indeed, for high school teachers and high school students, the study of Robert Penn Warren's writing is apparently null and void.

One reason Warren is not being taught in high schools is because many teachers have not themselves studied Warren. While teacher preparation programs require high school English teachers to have a vast amount of content knowledge, Warren is not one of the authors typically studied. Few colleges and universities across Kentucky do much to teach Warren in advanced American literature courses or in general survey courses. High school teachers just do not have the exposure to Warren that many of them feel necessary to assist in teaching his work. In addition, there are few teacher resources available for those who would like to teach Warren in the classroom. A quick Internet search shows that while there are hundreds of lesson plans available for studying canonical texts like *The Scarlet Letter* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, very little exists to aid in the teaching of Warren's work. Even the Pulitzer Prize winning *All the King's Men* does not stimulate many search engine hits for teaching aids. Without previous exposure to Warren or the ability to obtain additional support in teaching his works, high school teachers are simply leaving Warren out of the high school English curriculum.

Another reason Warren is not studied in high school is because for most high school students, Warren's diction would prove extremely difficult. Warren's use of sophisticated language filled with Latin, Greek, Medieval French, and Italian language would make some of his works difficult for most and hardly accessible for many. It would be difficult for the average high school student to be able to comprehend much of Warren's poetry, and his prose—while easier to follow—still contains elevated language.

So what should high school English teachers do in regards to Robert Penn Warren?

In a project to see how well Warren would be received by teens, I used my Advanced Placement Literature class as a place

to experiment with different ways of introducing Warren to high school students. While students who sign up for AP Literature are not necessarily "typical" high school students, I still felt valuable information could be gained from their insights. In the class, I had only two students, both girls who enjoy literature. I explained to them that throughout the class, we would be doing various activities with Robert Penn Warren, and what I wanted from them were their honest reactions to the texts, their opinions about his works in comparison to other, more traditional works, their input on how I went about "teaching" the Warren texts, and finally their overall evaluation of our Warren study.

To begin the Warren study, I had the students read three essays from *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition*: "Reconstructed but Unregenerate" by John Crowe Ransom, "A Mirror for Artists" by Donald Davidson, and "The Briar Patch" by Robert Penn Warren. In addition to these readings, I asked the students to read excerpts from the essays "Education, Past and Present" by John Gould Fletcher, "The Irrepressible Conflict" by Frank Lawrence Owsley, "A Critique of the Philosophy of Progress" by Lyle H. Lanier, and "Not In Memoriam, But In Defense" by Stark Young. I used these works as a jumping off point for their studies of Warren. I supplied the students with a very brief background to the Agrarians, and then they read and discussed the essays. Although Warren himself only contributed one essay to the book, I felt it important to begin our study with the Agrarians because that is essentially where Warren himself started. In my mind, if the students could get a grasp not only of Warren, but also of some of the ideas that existed during his time, they might better see connections between his works and the works and ideas of others—particularly in the major paired reading assignment I had planned.

Because I kept seeing connections to other works while reading the essays in *I'll Take My Stand*, I wondered if the students might themselves draw similar comparisons. I used this as our first exploration into studying texts by comparison. After having them read the essays, I had the students read Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*. While the assignment was a bit contrived, my intention was to see if the students could make the connection between the

essays they had read and a novel that is often taught in high school classrooms. I was exploring to see if a comparative approach could aid in studying Warren.

At first the students could not readily see any connections between the essays and the novel, but as we progressed, they began to see various correlations. The majority of the class time spent on these readings involved discussions on both topics brought in by the teacher and topics brought in by the students. For example, while I, in my role as teacher, was focusing on the effects of Industrialization on human relations, one student was quick to point out she felt the most important correlation was the devastation of Art due to Industrialization—a connection I felt was not only well made, but also helpful and insightful. In the culminating project for this study, the students were asked to construct a five-page paper in which they compared some element of the novel *Brave New World* to the essays we had discussed in *I'll Take My Stand*. The purpose of this was twofold: one, I wanted the students to understand that events do not occur in a vacuum—while the Southern Agrarians were opposing the rise of Industrialism, so too were others across the globe—and two, that intertextuality can yield fruitful results. While this assignment was successful, I wondered how well the students would do when we moved on to reading more complicated pieces of fiction and attempted to do similar comparative assignments.

For the next activity—the one that sparked the greatest critical thinking and enjoyment for myself and the students—I paired Warren's best-known work with one of the greatest American novels. Since the focus of this paper is Warren, I will only spend a short amount of time explaining how the study of *Moby-Dick* began. I first provided background information on Melville's time period. Then we read and discussed some reviews included in the Norton Critical Edition, laying the groundwork for our study. After reading the first four chapters, we spent time looking at the character of Ishmael and the meaning of his name. We also discussed the innate element in humans that draws them to water, the idea of how Ishmael thinks we should experience life, the introduction of drama into the narrative, and the symbolism of the various inns. What the students began to see without my having to tell them directly was

that there was much more going on here than a man going to sea: what we have is a great philosophical text. From that point, they were hooked. Both of the students were coming to class after each assigned reading eager to discuss what they felt they had found. This in itself was pleasing for me as a teacher, but now the challenge was to see if the connection to *All the King's Men* could be made.

After finishing *Moby-Dick,* the girls were pleased with their accomplishment; they had done something that they felt few had done before —at least few at their high school. Without telling them my intentions for the next assignment, I pulled the *All the King's Men* books from behind my desk and handed them to the students. This was met by a series of moans and groans on the horrors of reading another "big" book. Soon, however, their complaints subsided, and a look of confusion spread across their faces when I explained that the only thing they needed to do for our next class meeting was read the first paragraph and think about it. When entering class the next day, the students found on their desks the following passage from *Moby-Dick*:

> …but lulled into such an opium-like listlessness of vacant, unconscious reverie is this absent-minded youth by the blending cadence of waves with thoughts, that at last he loses his identity; takes the mystic ocean at his feet for the visible image of that deep, blue, bottomless soul, pervading mankind and nature; and every strange, half-seen, gliding, beautiful thing that eludes him. . . .
>
> But while this sleep, this dream is on ye, move your foot or hand an inch; slip your hold at all; and your identity comes back in horror. . . . And perhaps, at midday, in the fairest weather, with one half-throttled shriek you drop through that transparent air into the summer sea, no more to rise for ever.[1]

After they had read the passage, I asked them to take a few moments to consider how this compares to the first paragraph of *All the King's Men*. When I opened class for discussion, one girl stated that the only difference she saw was that one was on a boat and one was in a car; other than that, she said, "They're just alike.

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[1] Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick* (New York: Macmillan, 1964), 214-15.

You've got somebody warning somebody about getting killed if they daydream. If you don't focus on the here and now, you run a risk of meeting your ever after." This observation thrilled me. By allowing the girls simply to read two brief passages, one from each text, I had prompted them to make an initial connection between the texts. I hoped other connections would come to the students just as easily.

Whether or not the connections came easily, I don't know, but they certainly came, in all forms: Jack Burden as an Ishmael; Willie Stark as an Ahab; the focus on drama and the playing of parts; and many more. Perhaps the best way to explain the connections the students made is by including portions of their culminating papers:

> Jack Burden is a character very similar to Ishmael not only because he is the narrator of the story and because he is the character who survives in the end, but because he is the character that seems to be in charge of trying to figure things out. Just like Ishmael is so concerned with cetology and learning all he can about whales to better understand himself and his place in the world, Jack Burden is concerned with studying history so he can better understand himself and his place in the world. Although what they're studying may be different, their purposes are the same: What's the meaning of it all? What's my role in all this?

> Willie Stark is just like [Captain Ahab]. Both of these men like to have control over everything around them and are mostly focused on themselves not worrying about anybody around them. As Jack Burden says, "[Willie]'s interested in Willie. Quite simply and directly. And when anybody is interested in himself quite simply and directly the way Willie is interested in Willie you call it genius" (126). So even though Willie brings about his own demise by focusing on his power and forgetting to have any regard for others, he should still, according to Jack, be considered a genius. The same is true for Ahab. It's obvious that in the past he was highly regarded by the way he is spoken of by Captains Peleg and Bildad in the beginning and on the ship in the present day he is shown a tremendous amount of respect that shows his genius as a captain. Maybe it's the genius in them that brings about their downfalls.

While these are relatively short passages, I think they speak well to the connection the students made between the two novels. The students proved that Warren is very applicable to high school studies and should be incorporated more into the curriculum.

Moreover, while *All the King's Men* seemed to be a success, perhaps the greatest pleasure I as a teacher and my class as students experienced was the reading of Robert Penn Warren's *The Cave*. For the reading of this novel, I decided that I was through focusing the students' connections for them and that it was time for them to make their own connections. What followed is probably one of the most successful lessons I have ever taught and one I feel could be adapted to almost any ability-level class with the right amount of preparation. Other than assigning the reading, little other prep work was done as far as my students could see. I gave them no guidelines, just a brief overview of the novel. I told them there would be no paper to write, and they were ecstatic. I never mentioned the reading except to remind them when they should have the novel completed. On the outside, it looked as if I had no real plans for this novel, but that's because I decided the majority of the work needed to fall into the hands of the students.

When the day came for the students to have completed the novel, we had a rather typical class. We discussed the events and discussed the idea of people using others for their benefit, referring of course to the abuses placed on Jack Harrick while he was trapped in the cave. This discussion continued for two class meetings with no real revelation. On the third day of our study, I told the students that for the next class meeting, I wanted them to bring in examples of how, in our world today, people are still using and exploiting people for money or personal gain. I spoke very little the next class because both of my students had returned with so many good examples: the war in Iraq, the various situations in South Africa, and our own government here in the U.S.A. What amazed my students and what amazed me was the sheer number of atrocities that they could come up with in a short amount of time. Suddenly, Warren's novel was taking on an entirely new meaning: no longer was this just a book about a guy stuck in a cave—this was a book about the depravity that exists in man. As one student stated with great conviction:

"It's not that people are really bad or evil that's the problem; it's the fact that nobody pays any attention or really cares." Hearing such conviction from a high school student is exciting and fulfilling. It's what I love about my job.

At the end of our Warren semester, I felt the experiment had been successful; however, in order to determine what worked and what didn't, my students and I needed to evaluate the work we had done with Warren in class. Some of the changes I felt I needed to make were in regards to the initial assignment of *I'll Take My Stand*. While the assignment itself worked well, it did not give the students the added insight into Warren I thought it might. One of the reasons for this was that I allowed my own personal opinions and observations to override any worthy observations students might have gained from focusing on Warren's "The Briar Patch" alone. I was so focused on the students seeing the connections I saw that I forced too much attention on "Reconstructed but Unregenerate" and "A Mirror for Artists." Considering the emphasis on race in this country and yet the fear of serious discussion of this topic, and taking into consideration the various opinions about Warren's view on race, in the future I feel that a closer look at Warren's essay in regards to racism, or supposed racism, would make a more fruitful topic when studying Warren. I felt justified in my assumption when the students informed me in their evaluations that they never understood why they had to read those essays if I wanted them to focus on Warren.

In addition to their comments on the essays, the students offered other insightful suggestions. For instance, they did not like how they had to rush through the texts, particularly *Moby-Dick* and *All the King's Men*. Both commented that if they had more time to think about what was going on, then they could have done even more with the novels; both felt that much was left out because we didn't have enough time to talk about everything. One of the main things one of the girls said she wished we had spent more time on was comparing some of the other characters (not Ishmael and Ahab) from the two novels. For example, is Adam Stanton a Queequeg figure? While I regret that they both felt we left out portions, I was still pleased to see that they are thinking enough

about the novels to still have opinions or thoughts they would like to explore.

One of the most telling comments offered by the students as to why we should be teaching Robert Penn Warren is that made by Christine: "I guess sometimes we feel like we're just from Kentucky and nothing ever happens here. Most of the people I know think the same thing. Just knowing that Robert Penn Warren came from some little spot in Kentucky kind of makes me proud." So there it is—potential. In a world where so many teenagers are struggling to believe that they are capable of achieving something if they are not just handed everything, they need to study about people who come from, especially by today's standards, pretty meager means and still are huge successes. Aside from the stories he wrote, the success of Warren is an important story itself.

Another suggestion one of the girls had was that if it had been a larger class, our study of *The Cave* would have been much more exciting because there would have been more opinions and more ideas than just those of the three of us. This comment prompted me to remember that one of my main goals during this entire process was to determine how I, or any other teacher, could better incorporate the teaching of Warren into the regular high school class room. I think my student got it right: we needed more people for richer, fuller discussions. I regret to say that students are not lining up to take AP Literature classes at my school, but all students have to take English—the perfect setting for a larger discussion.

Therefore, to move the study of Warren into the typical high school English classroom, teachers should first spark student interest in the subject. *The Cave* offers the perfect opportunity to engage students with the "story" of the novel because it is based in part on the real life story of Floyd Collins. Introducing the novel by discussing what happened to Floyd Collins and showing some of the actual pictures of the attempted rescue would pique student interest. At this point, students would begin reading the book. To maintain student interest, the teacher should read aloud to the class at various points throughout the novel, assign short reading passages for students, have frequent reading checks and discussions, and allow the students to talk in small groups about the novel on

a fairly regular basis. The teacher could also incorporate the use of Graphic Organizer and any other tool that would help keep the class oriented.

Once the novel is finished, the teacher should introduce the idea of Warren's novel being more than about a man stuck in a hole; it's about man's tendency to profit from someone else's pain. After discussing this topic, the teacher would then divide the class into five separate groups, and each group would be given a different article to read. For example, one group might have an article that talks about some of the large companies that are profiting from the war in Iraq; one group might have an article that talks about oil companies and how they're making a huge profit while the average citizen is struggling with the high price of oil and gas; one group might have an article that discusses Hurricane Katrina and individuals who profited from that disaster; the list goes on. After getting the article, every member of each group is responsible for reading and discussing it within his/her group. Once the groups have finished their discussions and agreed on the most important parts of their articles, each group will pick a representative to sit on a panel in front of the class. This representative will take on the role of the author of the piece and will explain to the class what the main points were the author had to say. After each of the five representatives has spoken, it's then time to take comments from the floor. Students in the audience are prompted to synthesize some of the information being presented to them with *The Cave*. By requiring students to show how at least two of the articles relate to *The Cave*, students are finally moving beyond the surface level of reading for story only. With the proper setup and monitoring, this could also turn into a lively debate where students are allowed to disagree with other students, presenting their side and then letting the opposing side make their rebuttal. This is the type of discourse that leads to learning, and this is the type of discourse studying the works of Robert Penn Warren could bring about.

Numerous struggling readers attend our high schools. When these students come to us and are not reading proficiently, we as teachers must decide what we are going to do to help ensure that the students who come to us with poor reading skills do not leave

us in the same condition. What will it take to move those students who score below proficient in reading up to the proficient level by the time they leave high school? What can we do to ensure that students like the ones who take my regular English class get the same exposure to ideas as those students who take my AP Literature class? While AP should be more difficult and more intense, it does not mean that these students should be the only group privileged to think critically and be exposed to new ideas. In my opinion, if we are to help our regular students not only improve reading skills but also begin to think about the world in which they live, it is no longer optional to supply them with easier texts to read; they must be challenged. We can no longer afford to talk about high standards and stop short of seeing those standards met. The only true improvement will come when students are finally legitimately challenged. Robert Penn Warren, particularly for those of us here in Kentucky, is a perfect starting point.

III

A Lesson Plan for Teaching Robert Penn Warren's Short Stories to the iPod Generation

Kristina Rice

Sex. Love. Addiction. Choice. Hope. Hopelessness. Pregnancy. Success. Failure. Goals. These words serve as a brief list of appealing subjects high school Honors English classes can discuss while studying a selection of Robert Penn Warren's stories. As a high school English teacher, I know that students will be intrigued by the juicy language and pertinent themes in several of Warren's short stories. Students have serious concerns about their current lives and futures, and Warren's stories—surprisingly, since they were written before the advent of cell phones and iPods—are applicable to the lives of today's high school students.

The four stories I chose for our Robert Penn Warren unit are "Goodwood Comes Back," "A Christian Education," "The Love of Elsie Barton: A Chronicle," and "Her Own People," stories that

clearly connect to teenagers' modern lives. These stories share several common threads. For example, all of the stories have young characters seeming to be lost, hopeless, and basically confused about the purpose of life. In "Goodwood Comes Back," Luke is given the opportunity of a lifetime to play professional baseball, but he blows it because of his addiction. The narrator in "A Christian Education" is unwilling to save another human's life and questions why he reacted in such a horrific manner. Elsie Barton, the main character in the story bearing her name, gives in to peer-pressure and suffers the consequences for the rest of her life. Finally, Viola, a dynamic character in "Her Own People," is searching for her identity and longing to be treated as an equal. Even though I have only been teaching for three years, I know that students have the same concerns as these fictional characters. Nevertheless, teaching Warren's fiction to a class of seventeen year olds requires special tactics, which I outline in the following lesson plan.

The title of the unit is "Discovering Modern Themes in Robert Penn Warren's Short Stories." As students read and discuss Warren's stories, the main objective is to create connections between his fictional plots and characters and students' non-fictional lives. When planning any reading assignment, it is crucial to ask pre-reading questions to involve the students in the reading before they even open the book. Consider, for example, the story "Goodwood Comes Back." As Luke, the main character, is developed, it is obvious that he becomes homesick. So, before reading the story, the students will discuss the following questions: "What does it mean to be homesick? If you move away from your hometown, what will you miss?" By answering these two simple questions, students become more invested in the story. A second example is taken from the story "The Love of Elsie Barton." Before even telling the students the title of the story, I play a song about being mistreated and staying silent. After listening to the song and thinking about the lyrics, students invent a character and a plot for the story based on the theme of the song. This activity encourages students to predict events, which sparks interest in the related reading. Another way to generate pre-reading interest is through the use of current popular culture, especially songs and film.

To begin the unit, students listen to a song by Modest Mouse entitled "The World at Large." I provide them with a copy of the lyrics and ask them to think about how this song symbolizes hopelessness and drifting through life. Students also listen to other songs throughout the unit. For example, they listen to Johnny Cash's "Man in Black," which fits perfectly with the story "Her Own People." The lyrics describe different types of discrimination and how harmful it is to a society. Additionally, students watch the first thirty minutes of the film *Reality Bites* to help generate ideas about a hopeless and lost generation. The movie clip and the song stimulate the students to ask such questions as: "What does success really mean? How can I begin to plan for the future?" Asking such personal questions helps the students to make more intimate connections to Warren's stories.

Finally, to help students create connections between Warren's short stories and modern youth, students read one of two novels, *The Catcher in the Rye* or *A Separate Peace*. The main characters in both novels represent the idea of a lost generation. Holden, the main character of *The Catcher in the Rye*, is completely disillusioned with society. Hopes and goals mean nothing to Holden. In fact, he wishes to be dead on several occasions, just like certain characters in Warren's stories. Instead of going to school, Holden would rather roam the streets and drink, which makes his personality similar to Luke in "Goodwood Comes Back." Moreover, when reading "A Christian Education," students who are reading *A Separate Peace* may see a connection between the plots and the characters. The narrators in both stories watch someone fall to his death or almost death, and they do nothing about it except battle with themselves about why they let it happen. The ideas of guilt and avoiding responsibility are seen in both stories. Also, Gene, the main character of *A Separate Peace*, is much like Holden and several of Warren's characters because he is confused about his ambition in life, and he does not want to be a part of society.

In conclusion, Warren's stories provide excellent reading material for high school students because they discuss hot topics, such as sex and addiction, that students find engaging, and also because the stories pair successfully with familiar texts in contemporary popular culture.

Unit Plan: Discovering Modern Themes in Robert Penn Warren's Short Stories

Unit Focus: Robert Penn Warren's Short Stories
Lesson Length: Three weeks
Class Time: 90 minutes each

Context:

Students are in an honors class, and they are expected to complete independent reading and writing projects throughout each unit. Students have successfully read and analyzed a variety of genres throughout the year, and they are familiar with many literary terms.

Learner Goals:

To analyze Robert Penn Warren's short stories
To comprehend the importance of theme, character, and purpose
To realize the use of culture and concerns of society through reading
To connect to what we read by visualizing personal experiences
To improve reading, writing, and communication skills

Essential Question:

- What are the connecting themes in Warren's short stories, and how do the themes connect to our modern lives?

Guiding Questions:

Introduction to Warren:

- Why is it important to read works by a Kentucky author?
- What are some key events in Warren's life?
- What are the key themes of his writing?

Independent reading assignments (**The Catcher in the Rye** ***or*** **A Separate Peace):**

- How are the characters in the novels similar to the characters in the short stories?
- How are the themes similar?

Research about the Lost Generation/Generation X:

- What is the meaning of the terms? Where and how did they originate?
- Based on the definitions, how do the terms describe modern society?

"Goodwood Comes Back"

- How does the main character represent the idea of a lost generation?
- How is success defined?

"A Christian Education"

- What is a Christian education?
- How do the characters, setting, and conflict of this story advance the plot?
- How is the idea of the transition from innocence to experience expressed in this story?

"The Love of Elsie Barton: A Chronicle"

- How does the title connect to the themes and characters of the story?
- Why is it important to stand up for what you believe in?
- How are the main characters in this story a symbol of modern youth?

"Her Own People"

- What is discrimination?
- How is a social movement developed in this story?
- What is the character motivation in this story, and why is it important to the plot?

Assessment:

Formative Assessment:

- Reflective writing completed in composition notebooks
- Detailed essays
- Character/theme/plot charts
- Notes/Outlines
- Journals based on novels

Summative Assessment:

- Final essay comparing all stories
- Final test based on novels
- Personal Narrative
- Story journals/lexicon/passages

Learning Events:

Brief Outline of Daily Activities

1. Introduce Robert Penn Warren

Students will go to the library and complete a Web Quest about Warren's life and writing. Listed below is a brief outline of what students will be looking for:

- Birth date and death date
- Birth place and places lived
- Education
- Personal Life
- Awards
- Famous works
- Themes
- Literary period
- Writing style

Selected students will present their information about Warren's life and writing. Students will discuss the importance of reading a Kentucky author in a Kentucky high school. They will write a journal entry predicting how much his writing will reflect a southern way of living.

2. Assign books and discuss unit objective

Students will be broken up into two literary groups. Half of the class will be reading *The Catcher in the Rye*, and the other half will be reading *A Separate Peace*. Both of these books connect to the themes and the characters of Warren's short stories.

Students will be given reading guides discussing their independent reading schedule for the books. As they read the books, students are expected to keep detailed journals outlining the main characters' motivations, actions, and attitudes. Their main goal is to show how Holden and Gene represent the modern idea of a lost generation. Students will be given one hour each week to read their book in class, and the rest of it should be read outside of class. Their journals will be checked on a daily basis, and they are expected to complete projects and tests discussing the main ideas of the book.

After assigning the books and checking students' understanding of assignments, the instructor will give the students a thirty-minute Internet research project. In the computer lab, they will be researching the basic concept of the following terms: "generation" and "lost generation." They will be looking for definitions of the terms, time periods, causes, effects, importance to society, etc.

Next, students will listen to a song by Modest Mouse entitled "The World At Large." These lyrics fit in with the theme of the students' Internet research. Students will listen to the song and analyze the lyrics. They will complete a journal entry discussing the themes of this song, connecting it to the idea of searching for a hopeful future.

Sample lyrics:

Ice-age heat wave, can't complain.
If the world's at large, why should I remain?
Walked away to another plan.
Gonna find another place, maybe one I can stand.
I move on to another day,
to a whole new town with a whole new way. . . .

I like songs about drifters — books about the same.
They both seem to make me feel a little less insane.
Walked on off to another spot.
I still haven't gotten anywhere that I want.
Did I want love? Did I need to know?
Why does it always feel like I'm caught in an undertow? . . .

After students have discussed the main ideas of the song, they will watch a brief clip of the film *Reality Bites*. In the beginning of the movie, the main character delivers a graduation speech, and the speech basically focuses on the importance of being successful and finding a good job. But the speech leaves the audience with the thought that there should be more to life than just a job and success. Immediately after the speech, the character who gave it reveals her true opinions about life. Basically, she doesn't have a clue what she is doing, and she has no plans to become "successful" any time soon. When students have watched about thirty minutes of the movie, they will connect it to the lyrics and the article; then they will predict themes of the first story they will be reading.

3. Discussion and reading

Students will read *The Catcher in the Rye* or *A Separate Peace* for thirty minutes.

Keeping the main ideas of the research, song lyrics, and movie in mind, students will begin reading and discussing the first short story by Warren. This story is entitled "Goodwood Comes Back." Before reading the story, the students will answer a series of questions to help them connect to the themes and the characters of the story. Below is a brief outline of the pre-reading questions:

- What are the dangers, both physical and mental, of drinking alcohol excessively?
- To be viewed as being successful, must a person move away from his/her hometown?
- Analyze the following statement: "You can't go home again."
- What does it mean to be homesick? If you moved away from your hometown, what would you miss?

After discussing the questions in small groups, the class will begin reading the story. The story will be read aloud during class time. Students will take turns reading. As students read, they will need to stop about every two pages to discuss how one of the pre-reading questions is seen in the story. If we do not finish the story in class, we will finish reading it the next period.

After reading all of "Goodwood Comes Back" and connecting the pre-reading questions to the story, students will complete a variety of activities. They will be broken into four groups and each group will complete one of the following activities:

- Identify and explain three southern themes about relationships and home.
- Choose one of the pre-reading questions, and create a chart with three quotes from the story, proving how the question connects to a theme of the story. Explain the quotes.
- Create three aphorisms for this story. Explain what each means and how it applies to the story.
- Using specific quotes from the story, discuss how Luke represents the idea of a lost generation.

Next, students will be asked to write brief essays about the story. In their essays, they are required to use at least three quotes from the story, and they are to document their quotes in MLA format. Their essays need to be at least three to five paragraphs. They can choose from the following two topics:

- Compare the beginning of the story to the end of the story. How far does it come?
- Compare the narrator to Luke. What does each character represent?

4. Discussion and reading

Before reading the second story, students will review the major concepts of the Lost Generation, Generation X, and the general themes of Warren's writing. Next, students will complete a pre-reading activity to introduce the story "A Christian Education" to them. Students will have about fifteen minutes to complete the activity listed below:

> Write a one page personal narrative about a time you turned the other cheek when someone was mean to you. Discuss if you made the right decision or if you should have reacted differently.

The teacher will introduce the story to the students by reminding them to think about the idea of trying to escape responsibility, even if it means not helping someone in need. Students will know the main goal in reading this story is to apply the themes of it to modern society.

Students will read the story aloud; each student will take his/her turn. As they read the story, students should stop and discuss the main ideas of it. When students finish reading the story, they will complete different activities in their literary groups. Below is a brief explanation of the assignments:

- Create a detailed plot outline of this story.
- Develop a chart outlining the main characters and their attributes.
- Generate a list of the author's purposes in writing this story.
- Design a web describing the modern connections to this story.

5. Discussion and reading

Students will be given thirty minutes to read their books.

Students will be asked to complete brief essays about the story "A Christian Education." In their essays, they are required to use at least three quotes from the story, and they are to document their quotes in MLA format. Their essays need to be at least three to five paragraphs. They can choose from the following two topics:

- Mr. Nabb, a character from the story, says, "A Christian education was the greatest thing in the world." Discuss this quote using your opinion and information from the story. What is a Christian education? Based on this story, how do you think Warren feels about a Christian education?
- How is the idea of a lost generation developed in this story? How is the lack of accepting responsibility shown through the plot and the characters?

After completing their essays, students will briefly share their ideas. During their discussion, students will need to analyze the teaching behind a Christian education and the importance of accepting responsibility.

6. Discussion and reading

To begin the next Warren story, students will listen to a song entitled "Breakaway" by Kelly Clarkson.

Sample lyrics:

Grew up in a small town
And when the rain would fall down
I'd just stare out my window
Dreaming of what could be
And if I'd end up happy
I would pray

Trying hard to reach out
But when I tried to speak out
Felt like no one could hear me
Wanted to belong here
But something felt so wrong here
So I'd pray
I could break away

I'll spread my wings and I'll learn how to fly.
I'll do what it takes till I touch the sky.
Make a wish, take a chance,
Make a change, and break away.
Out of the darkness and into the sun.
But I won't forget all the ones that I love.
I'll take a risk, take a chance,
Make a change, and break away. . . .

After listening to this song and analyzing the lyrics, students will write a journal entry to predict what the story, "The Love of Elsie Barton: A Chronicle" is about. In their journals, they will create a character and a plot for the story. Then, keeping their predictions in mind, students will discuss the following pre-reading questions in their literary groups:

- If a girl gets pregnant out of wedlock, should she be forced to marry the father of the child? Why or why not?
- What defines rape? How serious of a problem is rape in modern society?
- Why is it important to stand up and speak your mind even if there may be negative consequences?
- How do you define self-respect? How does a person gain self-respect?

When students have discussed these questions, they will again make predictions about the plot and characters of the story. Next, students will begin reading the story. As students read aloud, they need to stop every few pages and discuss the reading. After finishing the story, students will review and discuss the pre-reading questions in their literary groups, checking to see if any viewpoints have changed after reading the story. Then, students will complete the following activity:

- Review the song lyrics, and compare them to Elsie Barton. How is she much different than the persona in the song? How is she like the persona?
- What questions would you like to ask Elsie? Why? Think about Hester from *The Scarlet Letter*. How is Elsie like or unlike Hester?
- What is the specific conflict in this story? How is it resolved?
- Discuss the use of a flashback in this story. How is it effective?
- What role does gender play in this story? Explain with specific details about the characters.
- Think about your grandparents or great grandparents. How often have you talked to them about their past? Generate questions you would like to ask them.

***7.* Discussion and reading**

Students will be given thirty minutes to read their books. "Her Own People" will be the final short story the students read. Before reading the story, students will discuss, in groups, different types of discrimination, based on race, age, gender, class, ethnicity, etc. Each

group will be asked to give examples of the type of discrimination and why they think it exists. Students will then listen to "Man in Black," a song by Johnny Cash. As they listen, they are to highlight the different types of discrimination discussed in the song. After listening to and analyzing the song, students will share their ideas in their literary groups.

Sample lyrics:

Well, you wonder why I always dress in black,
Why you never see bright colors on my back,
And why does my appearance seem to have a somber tone.
Well, there's a reason for the things that I have on.

I wear the black for the poor and the beaten down,
Livin' in the hopeless, hungry side of town,
I wear it for the prisoner who has long paid for his crime,
But is there because he's a victim of the times.

I wear the black for those who never read,
Or listened to the words that Jesus said,
About the road to happiness through love and charity,
Why, you'd think He's talking straight to you and me. . . .

After listening to and talking about the song, students will begin reading "Her Own People." As students read, they need to stop and discuss connections between the story and the song. For example, students will discuss the differences of class and race clearly developed in the story, and they will connect these to the differences of class demonstrated in the song. Also, after reading the story, students will no doubt link Viola and the persona of the song – both trying to defend their human right of dignity.

When students finish reading the story, they will complete a character analysis. The character analysis will ask students to compare and contrast the main characters of the story. Also, they will need to discuss character motivation, especially for Viola. When students complete their character analysis chart, they will be

asked to discuss parts of it with the class. Their presentations will open up the floor for class participation and analysis of the story.

To continue a literary discussion, students will read the poem "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings" by Maya Angelou. Students will create comparisons between the poem and the story.

8. Synthesis of stories

At this point, students will be asked to choose a variety of literary elements from each story to compare with another story. For example, they will choose two characters from different stories and compare them, such as Luke and Viola. Also, students will be asked to compare themes by answering the following questions: "How is the theme of the transition from innocence to knowledge expressed in each short story? How is the idea of a hopeless, wandering future for youth developed in each story? What is Warren's purpose in writing these stories about youthful generations? Which stories did you enjoy the most and the least? Why?"

Once students complete their written discussions, they will share their opinions as a class and synthesize the stories.

Also, students will have a cumulative assignment due. As they are reading the short stories, they will be required to keep a detailed journal about their reactions to the stories. Students' reactions should discuss the following topics:

- Characters they connect with and why
- Experiences they connect with and why
- New ideas or thoughts
- Reactions to main characters' actions

In their journals, they will create a lexicon, writing down unfamiliar words, defining them, and writing a sample sentence using the word correctly. In addition to their reactions and lexicons, the students will write down a favorite passage from each story with an explanation of why it is important to the plot/character of the story and why they chose it. At the end of the unit, their journals, lexicons, and passages are due.

Reflection upon the unit

Overall, the unit is organized and ready to be used in a classroom environment. Each story is broken up into its individual assignment, so the stories and activities do not have to be taught in order or in one unit.

When I am in a college class, I like for the teacher to guide the discussion and give clear direction, but not to control the class's conversation. Therefore, I tried to arrange the unit so that the students were completing research, writing essays, developing journals, analyzing stories, and creating connections with little direct instruction from me.

I anticipate the unit will take at least three weeks, especially if the students read, analyze, and discuss in the manners I want them to. Therefore, I hope the students truly make connections with the characters and the themes. I hope to emphasize the connections between the Lost Generation/Generation X philosophies. Also, I do not want this unit to be depressing to the students; by reading about these lost characters, students will begin to find direction in their own lives – at least that is the plan.